

## **Live, love, learn**

My love for books and reading began when I first learned to look at pictures with words. At that age, those letters on the pages were magically large and few, and pictures came to life. The words were things and people, colours and sounds. Then, came the never-ending fairy-tales and stories that uplifted me to an even higher realm. My brother, TAN Beng Tee, and sister, TAN Beng Neo, gave me my first books and sowed in me the love for reading and imagining.

Then came the schooldays. Looking back, I see them as the start of my growing outside of the biological family, of learning from other teachers, like an adolescent in an ancient tribe who has to go on his own visionquest into the wilderness to discover his totem animal and himself. In an Indian drumming ritual in Berkeley, California, I discovered that my totem is the tiger.<sup>1</sup> I realize I need to be courageous with the truth when teaching Dharma, even fierce in my friendship, one that changes the lives of those I know and love.

My early schooling was in Malacca, Malaysia, where I had many remarkable teachers in the Tranquerah English School, the Gajah Berang Secondary English School and the Malacca High School. They deeply inspired me, and helped me prepare for adulthood. My secondary school library teacher, WONG Kim Siong, was such a great role model for me that I worked as the chairman of the school library committee for two years (the second and fourth years), and served on its committee throughout my secondary school years, training my school-mates on how to run the library (which won the best school library national award). After secondary school, I volunteered to help reorganize the Melaka state library, and encouraged other students to serve as volunteers.

My library training and self-learning prepared me for an effective study of Buddhism, so that I was able to compile an “**Integrated Syllabus**” for the different years of the Sunday Dharma School in the Malacca Buddhist Association in the 1970s. This syllabus was instrumental in giving the Buddhist Studies programme in Singapore secondary schools, under the leadership of ANG Beng Choo, in the 1980s, a vital initial boost to become the most popular of the religious studies electives.

From my secondary school English teacher, LEE Saik Chuan, I learned to see education as more than just schooling. I learned to appreciate esprit de corps with my peers, and to love the great outdoors as a Boy Scout (he was also a scout teacher), to appreciate music and to love English and its literature. Such inclinations served me well later as a Dharma student and sutta translator.

What I learned from library science prepared me for the more demanding rigours of learning at the tertiary level. Learning of my interest in philosophy, LIM Eng Chuan (an advisor of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, of which I was a founder vice-president) sponsored my studies as an external student of London University.<sup>2</sup>

A few kind lecturers, such Raymond L M Lee and his wife Susan Ackerman of the Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, introduced me to sociology, journals and research work. This training facilitated me in due course (the 1990s) in my study of psychology and counselling therapy, especially in the light of early Buddhism.

The goodness of such teachers continues to adorn my mind, allowing me to touch many other lives, and touch you so that you are able to read this reflection. The goodness of our

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<sup>1</sup> See Reflection, “[Do Bodhisattvas exist?](#)” R327 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Sadly I was unable to complete the course due to commitments to monastic, teaching and parochial duties.

teachers lives with us throughout our lives if we remember and celebrate them, even beyond the days of our own lives.

Now I am married. My loving wife, Ratna Lim, too, is deeply moved by love and learning. To learn is to love ourselves above everything else in this world. For, it allows us to learn to see the marriage of gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and obscurity, happiness and sorrow. These winds may blow, but the warm hearts and strong arms of marriage anchor us on the ground of love and creativity.

Out of this love, arose our two sons, TAN LIM Chai Leng and Chai Seng. As parents, our task is to humanize them in the early formative years, so that they see beyond the mere burden of having, and celebrate the joy of being.<sup>3</sup> We may be measured by how much we have learned from books and systems, but the ultimate test of life is in how we learn from every day of our lives. If we are aware and present to others, there's always something new to learn about ourselves, about nature, and the wonders that others can be, and to rejoice in them.

During the parents-teachers conference for our children, after receiving feedback on their study progress, we make it a rule to thank the teachers for their diligence in joining us to educate our children on a broader social and human level. We tell them that we appreciate their difficulties because we ourselves have been school-teachers before. We tell the teachers our own love stories, the adventures we have lived. We remind them that being a teacher is one of the most demanding but the noblest of human professions.

We should not only school our children, but socialize them to be creative and happy together in a global community. As teachers, we are surrogate parents and visionaries for the young. We need to inspire them with our true stories, the loves we have lived. We need to empower them by our own examples as truth-seekers, trail-blazers and star-gazers. We need to teach them to look beyond the eye and the world, and gaze up at the stars. We may not reach them, but we can chart our course by them. If we dare to dream, we will awake with clear vision.

There comes a time in our lives when we have to put away childish ways and things, even to set aside manly and womanly ways.<sup>4</sup> We not only have a mind, but a heart to see beyond our senses. If not for our parents' humanizing us in our early years, we would have remained beastly and caught in a rut and chase of worldliness. Our humanity is the ground for higher things, the space to freely grow. Then, there's our divinity: just look within to see it.<sup>5</sup>

Divinity is neither in the world nor out there. It is neither in the holiest of scriptures nor in the highest heavens. It is our struggle to break out of our animal nature, then to rise above our humanity to accept ourselves just as we are: this is the only place to begin our inner journey. Our vehicle is fuelled by our love for others as we love ourselves: love is an unconditional embrace of the good that we are all capable of.

The world can never know true love, only our hearts truly love. The world is often suspicious of our love, rejects our love, abuses our love, unable to feel our love. We must but continue to love, even when others do not deserve it. This is compassion, divine love. For, we could have switched places; but compassion blesses us even when we seem to fail or fall in the world's eyes. We are all better than that.

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<sup>3</sup> See Reflections, "[To have or to be?](#)" R166 2012 & "[From love must come wisdom](#)" R254 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See [Saññoga Sutta](#) (A 7.48), SD 8.7.

<sup>5</sup> See [Brahma, vihāra](#), SD 38.5.

Goodness has a habit of growing and returning home to roost, often unseen, in the darkest night. When seen, it is like a Leprechaun, a four-leaf clover, a talking bird<sup>6</sup> – we should rejoice in it. Rejoicing in the goodness of others, we are truly and doubly happy. Gladness is the joy of seeing our better selves in others, that we reflect one another, like two hands caressing, like musical notes singing together.

We can never change the world out there. The world is what it was, is and will be. We may try to help and heal others, but many more remain in the world unhelped, unhealed, untouched. Even our boundless embrace will miss many out of our reach and time. There's no one at fault here, not even in the stars. The fault is in the state of things, the conditions of the world and the acts of man. Man comes, man goes, but the world goes on forever impermanent, changing, becoming other.

Now the Dharma is with us. If we cling to the world, we live and die with it. If we truly see the Dharma, our death ends the world, making us death-free, nirvana. We can only see the Dharma by living it. To see the Dharma is to breathe in peace.<sup>7</sup> The breath is not a religion, not even Buddhism; it is neither a teaching nor a ritual; it is neither form nor emptiness; it is beyond heaven or paradise.<sup>8</sup>

What we breathe in, we must breathe out back into the world, the wind that flows in and around us. We cannot keep the wind. Life is to be lived: to grasp anything is to try to stop living, dead into the past, lost into the future. Only the now is here, but it is ever flowing, like our breath, like the wind.

If we keep seeing this flow of breath and wind, then we freely waft in the stream, heading surely to nirvana, fully free from the world as we know it. Whether through faith or through wisdom, we see only these changes. Seeing this, when take our last breath, we need no more. We are free from the animal, rich in humanity, and risen beyond divinity. No word that can speak of us, nor are there ways to measure us.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A talking bird is said to be a lucky omen, but better any lucky charm is the good in our thought, speech and action: see **Maṅgala Sutta** (Khp 5 = Sn 2.4), SD 101.5.

<sup>7</sup> See Reflection, "[Breathe Dharma](#)," R324, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> See Reflection, "[Everything is beautiful – really?](#)" R230 2012.

<sup>9</sup> See [\(Anicca\) Cakkhu Sutta](#) (S 25.1), SD 16.7.